

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-22

THE WASHINGTON POST
10 NOVEMBER 1982

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Syrians Strive To Oust Arafat As PLO Chief

Is Yasser Arafat about to lose his leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization after 14 years? Secret intelligence reports describe a move to oust him.

The wily Arafat emerged from the PLO's Lebanese disaster with an enhanced reputation as a moderate leader, even a statesman. He had an audience with the pope, and seemed on the verge of gaining world acceptance as a reasonable man.

All this cuts no ice with Syria, the most implacably, immoderately anti-Israel of all the Arab states. In fact, the more reasonable Arafat seems to become, the more he is detested by Syrian President Hafez Assad, who has long wanted to oust Arafat and replace him with a full-blown radical.

What makes this significant, of course, is that Syria is now the home of the greatest number of PLO guerrillas. The latest intelligence reports suggest that Assad is determined to take advantage of his position as host to the PLO and get rid of Arafat once and for all.

Among PLO leaders, the Syrians have secretly been trying to round

up support for their choice as chairman, Abu Iyad. Though Iyad is now in Syria, there is no evidence that he has given any encouragement to the Syrian efforts. But some PLO leaders are reported to have pledged their support for Iyad as the new chairman.

Assad's clandestine moves—and the support he has gained—were sparked by Arafat's talks with Jordan's King Hussein. Both Arafat and Hussein have been relatively positive about President Reagan's peace plan, which is anathema to the Syrians and the radical PLO leaders.

Assad was also angered by Arafat's decision to set up his temporary headquarters in Tunisia. Assad wants PLO headquarters to be in Syria, where he will be able to control it. Arafat is too clever to be caught in that trap.

Despite their long-standing hostility, Arafat has had good reason to be grateful to Assad in the past. As secret CIA reports note, Syria was for years the indispensable arms supplier to PLO forces in Lebanon.

"Almost all arms and equipment destined for the guerrillas in Lebanon, whatever their source, [came] through Syrian territory," a CIA report said. This obviously put Damascus "in a position to control the flow of arms to the fedayeen."

Just as obviously, this arrangement rankled Arafat, who looked for ways around it—like setting up direct links to the Soviets.

The seriousness with which Arafat is taking Assad's challenge is evident in PLO communications intercepted by the National Security Agency. Several of these decoded messages, classified "Secret Spoke," were shown to my associate Dale Van Atta.

The messages described emergency PLO-command meetings Arafat held in Beirut to figure out ways of dealing with Assad's attempt to unseat him. Arafat and other Fatah leaders tried "to counter Syrian influence—and demonstrate their own independence—by patching up their relations with PLO radicals and drawing closer to leaders of Arab states interested in limiting Syrian influence," one message said.

Arafat was so desperate he even asked the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to ask the United States to stop Syrian interference in Lebanon—a request based on the startling assumption that U.S. influence is significant in Damascus.

The Syrians' current favorite to replace Arafat, Abu Iyad, has what the CIA terms "excellent radical credentials" in Syrian eyes as head of the defunct terrorist group, Black September. But there are other candidates the Syrians would approve of: Dr. George Habash, the uncompromising leader of the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Achmad Jabril, a former Syrian army officer and head of the Popular Front's General Command.